BRAHMO SAMAJ IN BIHAR IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

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Brahmo Samaj was the first movement for religious reform initiated in India in the nineteenth century under the impact of western education and culture. Its place of origin rightly happened to be Bengal - the state which first came in contact with western education and way of life in a big way. The ideals of Brahmo Samaj stirred the educated Bengali Hindu society. It will be fruitful study if we examine the consequences of the movement in other areas of India in order to understand and appreciate its role and dynamism.

In this connection Bihar is an excellent case study for a variety of reasons. The founder of Brahmo Samaj, Raja Rammohun Roy, had come down to Patna to study Muslim scriptures.[1] He started his career as a sheristadar in the office of the District Commissioner at Ramgarh in Hazaribagh district.[2] Bihar could claim acquaintance with the originator of the movement right from his formative years. Secondly, a number of Bengali Brahmos were always present in Bihar because the Bengalis having received the English education constituted the bureaucracy. They were the doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professional people in the society and had been imported by

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1. Sastri, Pandit Sivanath, "Rammohun Roy : the story of his life", The Father of Modern India Commemoration Volume of the Rammohun Roy Centenery Celeberations, Calcutta, 1933, (Centenery Publicity Booklet-1), p.9.

2. Diwakar, R.R. (ed), Bihar through the Ages, 1958, p.677.

the English to serve the needs of administration. In other words, Brahmos came down to Bihar in the course of their professional duties. These distinctive traits add to the significance of the study of Brahmo Samaj in Bihar in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Since the Bengalis have been coming to Bihar continuously it is difficult to state precisely as to when the first Brahmos entered Bihar. However, as the second-half of the nineteenth century unfolded itself, they were to be found in the chief urban centres of the Province. Thus, Brahmo Samaj was established at Hazaribagh in 1867.[3] In 1870, on the request of the Brahmos of Monghyr, the government granted them a piece of land measuring one bigha for the construction of a place of worship.[4] The reason for the Brahmo population of the town was the existence of the Railway workshop at Jamalpur and the gun factory in Monghyr which necessarily required the services of technically skilled and English educated Indians, who for historic and geographical reasons usually came from Bengal.

Another indication of the spread of the Brahmos in Bihar can be had from the fact that Keshub Chunder Sen, the great leader of Brahmo Samaj, entered into correspondence with the government with regard to providing facilities for

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3. Sen, Punyamoy, "Hundred years of Hazaribagh Brahmo Samaj", The Searchlight, (Patna) April 30, 1967.

4. Land Revenue Progs. A; No.48, May 1870; 49, May 1870; 59, August 1870; 63, April 1871 and 64, April 1871.

registration of the marriages of the Brahmos in 1872.[5] The government agreed. On June 4, 1872 they issued a notification laying down detailed rules for the registration of Brahmo marriages.[6] This was evidently necessary because Brahmo followers in Bihar were encountering difficulties in following their customs.

The fact that Brahmo families could be found in all important places in Bihar can be inferred from the appointment of Registrars for solemnising Brahmo marriages subsequently. In 1886 the Sub-Registrar of Motihari Sadar was appointed as an ex-officio Registrar for the Champaran district.[7] Mr. C. Shanne, Bar-at-law, became a Marriage Registrar in Monghyr after the death of Babu Mohendra Nath Roy in 1900.[8] Babu Jay Kali Datta was appointed as the Registrar for Ranchi by a notification of 1901.[9] Babu Kshetra Nath Ghosh of Deoghur became the Registrar for the district of Santhal parganas in 1904.[10] Babu Tin Couree Bose, the Secretary of Brahmo Samaj, Giridih, a Sub-divisional town in Hazaribagh district, requested the Inspector-General of Registration of Bengal in 1906 to appoint a permanent Marriage Registrar, because the earlier appointee Babu Umesh Chandra Dutt had been unable to carry on his duty because of ill-health.[11] The government acceeded to his

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5. Ecclesiastical Proceedings, 1-8, June 1872. (Hereafter referred to as Eccl. Progs.)
6. Eccl. Progs. A., 1-8, June 1872.
7. Eccl. File 3, Progs. B, 1-3, June 1886.
8. Eccl. File 3A-2, Progs. B, 3-5, July 1900.
9. Eccl. File 3A-1, Progs. B, 10-12, April 1901.
10. Eccl. File 3A-1, Progs. B, 6-8, October 1904.
11. Eccl. Progs. B, No.1-3, November 1906.

request and allowed the rural Sub Registrar of the Sub-division to function in that capacity.[12] In 1907, two Brahmos from Deoghur, Babu Sukumar Dutt and Babu Satis Chundra requested the Deputy Commissioner of Santhal Parganas to appoint Dr. Fakir Chandra Sadhukhan, L.M.S., as Marriage Registrar in place of Khetra Mohan Ghosh who had left the place due to transfer.[12(a)] Again, Babu Nalin Bihari Gupta, the Vice-Chairman of Dumraon Municipality, was appointed as Marriage Registrar for the purpose of registering a marriage in the family of Babu Brajendra Kumar Basu in 1908.[13]

The Census Report of 1881 noted the presence of Brahmos in Patna.[14] The Census Report of 1901 mentions their existence in almost all the district towns of Bihar.[15] In short, by the end of the nineteenth century, Brahmos could be found in all the important urban centres of Bihar.

The Brahmo Samaj movement seemed to have received great impetus after the visit of Keshub Chunder Sen to Monghyr in 1868.[16] He had left his family there while proceeding on a tour of the North-Western Province. On his return he again stayed in Monghyr. His host was Prosonno Kumar Sen, an employee in the Audit Department

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12. Ibid., Notification No.2573, November 10, 1906.

12(a) Eccl. Progs. B, 75-78, May 1907.

13. Eccl., File 3A-1, Progs. B, 7-9, May 1908.

14. Report on the Census of Bengal, Vol.II, 1881, pp.22-23.

15. Census of India, 1901, Vol. VIA, Bengal Pt.II, p.26.

16. Parekh, M.C., The Brahma Samaj, Kathiawad, 1929, p.92.

of the Eastern Railway.[17] It was under his inspiration that the local Brahmos sought a piece of land from the government and constructed a temple on it in 1872.[18]

It appears that Kesh b Chander Sen's contact with Bihar marked an important phase in the history of Brahmo Samaj in the province. Henceforth, intensive efforts were made to propagate the teachings of the Samaj. Some preachers appear to have made it the mission of their lives to carry the message to a wider audience.

Bhai Dinanath Mozoomdar, a railway employee of Monghyr, resigned his job in 1873 and became a full-time preacher.[19] After 1880 he was given Behar as his special field of service, and was recognised as its local minister.[20] At Bhagalpur he started a 'Prachar-Asram' and successfully brought a number of families within its fold.[21] Later he shifted his field of activity to Patna. When his health failed him, he moved on to Laherisari.

Bhakta Hare Sunder Bose and his nephew Bhai Braj Gopal Niyogi, who was ordained in 1897, took up missionary work on behalf of the Samaj.[22] It appears that the message of Brahmo Samaj failed to evoke a wide response. For example, we find

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17. Niyogy, N., The Apostles and Missionaries of the Navavidhan, Calcutta, (n.d.), P.33.
18. Ibid., p.31
19. Ibid., p.37.
20. Ibid., p. 38.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 67.

that only one Bihari Hindu, Bhai Baldeo Narain, who was born near Gaya, fell under the spell of Bhakt Hari Sunder Bose while he was preaching at Gaya.[23] He came from an humble family. He was ordained in 1887. He started preaching at Muzaffarpur.[24] But the orthodox Bihari Hindu opinion did not view with favour the propagation of Brahmo ideas. At Muzaffarpur he was garlanded with shoes.[25]

It is interesting to discover the reasons why Brahmo Samaj failed to make an impact on Bihari Hindus. Apparently, the cause was that Bihari Hindus were educationally still backward. Although a string of high schools covered all district headquarters, yet by 1880 there was only one college in Bihar. In the eighties the T.N.J. College (Bhagalpur) and Patna were established. While in the nineties G.B.B.College B.N. College (Muzaffarpur), R.D. & D.J. College (Monghyr) and St. Columba's College (Hazaribagh) were started. If we take a look at the list of successful candidates in B.A. Examination between 1864 and 1886 from the Patna College, we find that 57 Bengali Hindus and 44 non-Bengali Hindus and Muhammadans were on the list.[26] Thus the majority was made up of Bengalis. The Muslims followed them. The Brahmo Samaj, whose main followers were mainly western-educated persons in Bengal, did not thus have a recruiting base. The Bihari

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23. Ibid., p.63
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Patna University Golden Jubilee Sovenir, 1970, pp.355-6.

Hindu was unable to appreciate the highly philosophical doctrines of the Brahomo Samaj. Therefore, Arya Samaj with its easily intelligible doctrines became comparatively more popular in the second-half of the nineteenth century in Bihar.

The failure of Brahmo Samaj as a religious movement in Bihar in the second-half of the nineteenth century should not lead us to conclude about its total ineffectiveness. Socially, Brahmo Samaj exercised beneficial influence. The Brahmo Samajists acted as torch-bearers of western education. Many of the teachers in high schools and colleges were Brahmos, The Brahmo Samajists stood for emancipation of womenfolk from traditional handicaps. Their example of allowing the womenfolk to discard Purdah, permitting them to receive education at par with men, certainly set Bihari Hindus rethinking.

The Brahmos themselves tried to popularise female education. Mrs. P.C. Roy opened the first girls' school at Patna in 1891.[27] Under her fostering care as well as the support extended by other Brahmos, the institution developed and pioneered the cause of learning of the girls in the province.

The Brahmos preached widow-remarriage. The orthodox Hindu opinion reacted sharply and Bihar-Bandhu, a Hindi journal,[28] in 1894 sharply criticised them.

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27. Bankipore Girls' High School Magazine (Diamond Jubilee special number), 1958, p. 19.

28. The Behar Bandhu, August 7, 1894.

At least indirectly, the social reform movements amongst the Kayasthas and Bhumihar Brahmans, who were the first to take to western education in Bihar might be traced back to the influence of the Brahmo Samaj.[29]

It was a Brahmo, G.P. Sen, who laid the foundations of English journalism in Bihar by brining out a newspaper, Bihar Herald in 1878 from Patna, Happily the paper is still being published.

Brahmo Samaj also provided a forum for the local intelligentsia to meet on a common platform. Thus Brahmo Samaj in Hazaribagh was established in 1867 as a result of the effort of Sri J.N. Mukherjee himself a non-Brahmo. While he lived, he took keen interest in its functioning.[30]

In short, Brahmo Samaj as a religious movement did not affect the Bihari Hindu community. But as a social movement, it compelled the orthodox section of the population to do some rethinking and revise its social attitudes. The degree of change, however, was still minimal.

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29. The social reform movement among the Kayasthas began in 1889 when the first Kayastha Conference took place at Patna. From 1898 caste conferences of Bhumihar Brahmans also started meeting.

In 1900, a Bhumihar Brahman from Muzaffarpur married according to Brahmo Samaj custom. (Letter to the Editor, The Bihar Times, March 4, 1900).

30. Sen, P., "Hundred years of Hazaribagh Brahmo Samaj", The Searchlight, April 30, 1967.